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Why wouldn't you consult us? Reflections on preventing radicalisation among actors in radical(ising) milieus

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Abstract

This article engages the situated knowledge of actors in radical(ising) milieus to enhance our understanding of radicalisation and how to counter it. The article draws on interviews and observations from two ethnographic case studies in the UK – one with young people from an ‘Islamist’ and one from young people in an ‘extreme-right’ milieu – as well as three mediated dialogue events organised with participants from these milieus. The article explores how actors in these two milieus themselves understand what ‘drives’ and what might ‘prevent’ radicalisation and the degree to which such emic understandings concur with, or deviate from, etic (academic, policy, practice) conceptualisations – in particular on actors’ understandings of the role of the state, and its counter-terrorism policies and agencies, in driving radicalisation. We outline the views and experiences of Preventing or Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE) interventions among milieu actors, which they encounter through the ‘Prevent’ arm of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy but also in the form of curtailment of their activity (prevention from attending events and bans on social media). Finally, we consider how these emic understandings and personal experiences are expressed in milieu actors’ own practices of preventing or constraining trajectories into extremism and the openness of research participants themselves to engaging with agencies involved in P/CVE employing dialogic approaches. The article brings new insight to the field by considering the understandings and experiences of counter-extremism policies and practices among those targeted by them and argues for the importance of engaging with individuals as subjects not objects of counter-extremism policy and practice.

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Introduction

In this article, we elicit, explore and engage the situated knowledge of actors in radical(ising) milieus to enhance our understanding of radicalisation and how to counter it. Following

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Malthaner and Waldmann (2014: 983), we understand a radical milieu – religious, ethnic or political – as an evolving relational and emotional field of activity through which collective identities are constructed. They provide the supportive social environments from within which those engaged in violent activity can gain affirmation and in which grievance narratives and ‘stigmatised’ knowledge circulate (Malthaner, 2017a: 389). Situated knowledge refers to the recognition that knowledge is shaped by the context in which it is produced and the social locations and identities of those who produce it. With some notable exceptions (discussed below), what we ‘know’ about radicalisation primarily reflects the post 9-11 (‘war on terror’) context, in which the concept became widely used, and the interests of the institutions (state and non-state) that have a stake in addressing it through preventative and counter extremism (P/CVE²) policy and practice. The views and experiences of radicalisation and deradicalisation processes among milieu actors – ‘extremists’ – are largely absent; they are positioned as ‘targets’ of, not stakeholders in, counter extremism interventions. This article argues that eliciting the situated knowledge of radical milieu actors makes visible important disjunctures between emic and etic³ understandings of radicalisation that may reduce the validity of the concept and thus the capacity of policies and interventions to speak effectively to those they address.

There is a growing body of literature critiquing etic conceptualisations of ‘radicalisation’ (Kundnani, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010; Lindekilde, 2012; Silva, 2018). However, this criticism, at least in the Anglophone literature, relates mostly to its (dominant) application to ‘Islamist’⁴ extremism while studies of emic interpretations of radicalisation, more generally, remain rare (exceptions include: Kühle and Lindekilde, 2012; Sieckelinck et al., 2019; Pilkington, 2021).⁵ Moreover, although, as the ‘targets’ of P/CVE policies and

² We use P/CVE as a short hand to refer to Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) initiatives aimed at reducing the conduciveness of environments to radicalisation and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) interventions designed to divert individuals from radicalisation to violence or promote behavioural disengagement or cognitive deradicalisation (see also: Scrivens et al., 2019: 1).

³ The terms ‘emic’ and ‘etic’, emanating from linguistic anthropology, are used here in line with their adoption in the social sciences to distinguish between concepts and categories rooted in actors’ self-understanding and ‘insider accounts’ (‘emic’) and those devised and deployed by external, scientific or policy/practice communities (‘etic’) (Whitaker, 2017; Sieckelinck et al., 2019: 677).

⁴ We use the term ‘Islamist’, to indicate a range of ideological positions rooted in the interaction between Islam and politics and distinguish this from ‘Islamic’, understood as relating to Islam as a body of religious thought.

⁵ There is of course a growing literature in a number of national contexts that draws on qualitative research with those still active in extremist milieus and thus captures ‘insider’ accounts of beliefs and activism; here our

interventions, radical milieu actors have valuable knowledge, based on first-hand experiences of counter-terrorism policing and P/CVE programmes and interventions, there is little consideration of how extremists themselves think violent extremism can be prevented and countered (Scrivens et al., 2019: 2). This article treads new ground in eliciting views of those still active in such milieus and considering experiences of actors in both ‘extreme-right’⁶ and ‘Islamist’ milieus.

Critical perspectives on radicalisation and countering radicalisation: setting the theoretical context

Contemporary use of the concept ‘radicalisation’ is intrinsically associated with a specific – ‘Islamist’ – terrorism and situated in attempts to understand, and counter, an apparent new security threat in the wake of the 9/11 attacks (2001), the emergence of ‘home-grown’ terrorism in Western Europe (2004-05) and the departure (and now return) of ‘foreign fighters’ to support ISIS/IS. As a result, della Porta (2018: 462) states, ‘radicalization has become a master signifier for the “war on terror”’. Muslim communities have been the primary target of counter-terrorism legislation initiated and implemented in the wake of the ‘war on terror’ (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011; Kapoor, 2018; Kundnani, 2014; McGhee, 2008), underpinned, Kundnani (2012: 19) argues, by elements of radicalisation scholarship, which, once taken up by law enforcement agencies, ‘becomes a prospectus for mass surveillance of Muslim populations’. In this way, ‘the sprawling official “counter-terrorism” apparatus’ makes the state central ‘to the production of contemporary Islamophobia’ (Massoumi et al., 2017: 8). Processes of ‘suspectification’ (Hickman et al., 2012) and surveillance (Hussain, 2014), through which counter-terrorism practices police the everyday lives of communities rendered ‘suspect’, are not only externally imposed but draw on the proactive involvement of Muslims in their own policing (Ragazzi, 2016: 729). Abbas (2019: 261) demonstrates how the co-option of Muslim community members to counter extremism

concern is more directly with where emic and etic conceptualisations concur or diverge and the implications of this for countering extremism.

⁶ The term ‘extreme-right’ refers to political ideologies characterised by authoritarianism, opposition to democracy and exclusionary nationalism (including biological and cultural racism) and is routinely applied to the movements in which respondents in this study were active.

fractures relations within Muslim communities as individuals internalise fears of state targeting, which precipitates internal disciplinary measures.

‘Preventative’ counter-terrorism has a particularly long reach into young people’s lives in the UK (Brown and Saeed, 2015; Thomas, 2016; Busher et al., 2017; Younis and Jadhav, 2020) due to the statutory status, since 2015, of the Prevent duty.⁷ Prevent has become routinised in key institutions of young people’s socialisation; educational institutions account for around one third of referrals to Prevent (Home Office, 2019, 2020). This statutory duty means, in theory, that Prevent is equally intrusive to all sections of the community; in 2019, for the first time, the proportion (24%) of referrals for right-wing extremist radicalisation and those for Islamist radicalisation was equal (Home Office, 2019) and in 2020, the proportion of cases taken further (through referral for possible Channel intervention) was weighted towards right-wing extremism (43% of such cases were for right-wing extremism and 30% for Islamist extremism) (Home Office, 2020: 12). That right-wing extremism is rising up policy agendas is also evident in the proscribing (in 2016) of extreme right organisation National Action and the proposal from the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE, 2019: 6) to re-orient counter extremism strategy towards what it terms ‘hateful extremism’; a proposal reflecting concern with identifying the harms to social cohesion of attitudes and behaviours (associated primarily with the extreme right) that fall short of violence but cause fear and spread hate.

While a key criticism of the UK government definition of extremism is that it fails to draw on the views and experiences of non-state actors, the CCE’s own extensive public consultation (ibid.: 2019: 5) fell short of eliciting and engaging with emic perspectives. Even in academic literature such an approach is rare. An exception is Kühle and Lindekilde’s (2012) study of a friendship-based Muslim milieu in Aarhus widely perceived as the city’s ‘radical’ Muslim milieu. By ‘listening and respecting how the actual target groups reflect on the phenomenon’ (ibid: 1608), the authors demonstrate that the etic concept of radicalisation fails to reflect the complex opinions, e.g. on terrorism, of actors in this milieu. This means, they argue, that the discourse of radicalisation, envisaging ‘a slippery slope from individual violent sympathies to membership of groups and engagement in collective violence’ potentially hinders rather than facilitates the identification and prevention of radicalisation

⁷ Section 26 of the UK Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 requires that social institutions give ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’ (HM Government, 2015: 2).

(ibid.: 1621). Pilkington (2021) finds a similar disjuncture between etic and emic understandings of what and who is ‘extremist’ among actors in an ‘extreme right’ milieu in the UK and argues that assumptions in etic discourse about the ‘closedmindedness’ of right-wing extremist milieu actors potentially closes off opportunities for engaging them in dialogue.

Why, we might legitimately ask, should we care what ‘extremists’ think? What can, or should, their views contribute to countering radicalisation? Our argument for this starts from an understanding of radicalisation⁸ as a societal process that is, arguably, an organic response to social and cultural intolerance, discrimination and withdrawal of the state from its welfare function alongside the extension of its coercive or surveillance function at home and its military adventurism abroad. Moreover, it is not an exceptional phenomenon – similar processes of movement towards acceptance/perpetration of violence (including self-harm) may be found among members of criminal gangs, religious or ideological cults, drug and alcohol users and even those with eating disorders. The very fact that radicalisation is a non-pathological and non-exceptional social and psychological process (Pisoiu and Ahmed, 2016: 4; Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2018: 95) means that it is open to critical reflection, shift and intervention. Society does not consist of the radicalised and non-radicalised; individuals may move towards and away from a range of cognitive and behavioural radicalisms over time, as their views and behaviours are mediated and moderated by individual characteristics, external influences and everyday contexts (Pilkington, 2016: 90; Lindekilde et al., 2019). The problem, for researchers, policymakers and practitioners is that the process of radicalisation is indisputably visible largely when it has reached its endpoint and results in acts of violent extremism or demonstrative support for them (e.g. travel to IS territory, the joining of prohibited groups). This is apparent in the aftermath of events where attention becomes focused on the ‘signs’ that were missed and the channels and agents of radicalisation at play in particular cases. However, in practice, the process of radicalisation is begun and, in most cases, stalled or ended in relatively banal contexts. It is here, still far from the apex of either the ‘opinion’ or the ‘action’ pyramids of political radicalisation (McCauley and Moskalenko,

⁸ We view radicalisation as a relational process that is neither connected to a particular ideological, political or religious content (Knott and Lee, 2020) nor linear or unidirectional in nature (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009).

2017), that routine engagement, especially among young people, with radicalisation messages is less visible and community-led counter-radicalisation is crucial.

The limited effectiveness of profiling in predicting who will take a pathway to violent extremism is well established (Horgan, 2008; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010: 810; Borum, 2011: 14; Bianchi, 2018) and makes working at the base of the radicalisation pyramid essential. However, identifying broad social groups who might be ‘at risk’ is also problematic. Recent systematic reviews of the scientific literature have found that there is limited empirical support for the association with terrorism of some widely cited ‘risk’ factors (Desmarais et al., 2017). Socio-demographic characteristics, for example, have much smaller effects on radical attitudes, intention and behaviours than social integration and bonding factors as well as a range of psychological traits and criminological factors such as low self-control, attitudes to the law and institutions and moral neutralisations (Wolfowicz et al., 2017). Moreover, identifying particular neighbourhoods, population segments, ethnic or religious groups or communities as ‘vulnerable’ to radicalisation carries real dangers of compounding existing stigmatisation and discrimination (Rosand, 2018: 74) thereby reinforcing the very grievance that drives radicalisation and deterring communities from engaging in P/CVE initiatives, especially where they emphasise security rather than safeguarding elements (Thomas et al., 2017: 83).

Engaging with understandings and experiences of radicalisation and counter radicalisation policies and practices among communities and groups who are positioned as the ‘targets’ of such policy and practice can furnish us with important situated knowledge. Attempts to do this to date have focused primarily on available life-history information on offenders or interviews with ‘former’⁹ extremists to understand: radicalisation and deradicalisation journeys (Sieckelinck et al., 2019; Horgan et al., 2017); processes of disengagement (Bubolz and Simi, 2015, Barrelle, 2015), barriers to exit (Jensen et al., 2020; Bjørgo, 2009); and the residual identities that complicate disengagement (Simi et al., 2017). While there is a growing evidence base drawing on interviews with active violent extremists (Post et al., 2003; Horgan, 2012; Dawson 2019; Khalil, 2019), it remains the case that what is

⁹ Sieckelinck et al. (2019: 63) define ‘former (extremist)’ as ‘a person who has left a political or religious group with a violent agenda *or* someone who has sworn off ideological violence that one once used or condoned’.

written about violent extremist offenders that seeks directly to inform P/CVE interventions is ‘rarely complemented by insights from the offenders themselves’ (Horgan et al., 2017: 75). An exception is Scrivens et al.’s (2019) exploration of how former right-wing extremists in Canada think that violent extremism can be prevented and countered. The study – including ten individuals identifying as ‘former extremist’ – found that most felt that they should be included among key stakeholders within a multi-sectoral response rooted in a social/community approach to countering extremism (ibid.: 2, 16-17). The study found that such formers concur with etic understandings that disenfranchised youth are the most vulnerable to recruitment into violent extremism and that ‘preventative measures should target this population’ (ibid.: 2). They point to the importance of inclusivity and non-judgmental attitudes when engaging with such young people and cite social and family support as well as respect and an openness to critical discussion about polarising issues as essential (ibid.: 16-17).

The appropriate role of ‘former’ extremists in P/CVE – indeed the very relationship between disengagement and deradicalisation and at what point the status of ‘former’ extremist is reached (Bjørge and Horgan, 2009: 3; Jensen et al., 2020: 3; Bubolz and Simi, 2015: 1593) – remains a significant issue of contention (see: Koehler, 2017: 220-222; Schewe and Koehler, 2021). How then might the experiences and views of actors *still in radical(ising) milieus* inform P/CVE? Based on the cases discussed below, we suggest that individuals who occupy such an ‘in-between’ space – being (with two exceptions) still active members of radical(ising) milieus but not having crossed the threshold to violent extremism – may offer particular insight into how the retention of connections with wider society may constrain radicalisation and/or facilitate deradicalisation. As Barrelle (2015: 140) argues, ‘sustained disengagement is actually about the proactive, holistic and harmonious engagement the person has with wider society afterwards’. Barrelle’s findings might be used – in our case on the outward rather than return journey – to point towards the importance for research participants of the retention of societal connections (however strained) and the potential to build on pro-social community orientations to strengthen social ties as well as positively contribute to P/CVE practice.

Introducing the milieus and field research

This article draws on two ethnographic case studies in the UK with young people from an ‘Islamist’¹⁰ milieu and from an ‘extreme right’ milieu. The nature of the two milieus is outlined below but their selection was informed by the general understanding of radical(ising) milieus as environments in which violence might not only be incited or escalated but also where radical messages might be criticised or challenged (Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014: 994). The boundaries of the milieu were drawn to include individuals at the margins, who ‘sympathize or share some elements of opinions or style; who mingle socially with activists; and who drift in or out of the scene’ (Bjørge, 2009: 30) and the trajectories of young people through them were anticipated to include those of ‘non-radicalisation’ (Cragin, 2014) as well as radicalisation. Although all but two of the research participants in the studies drawn on here remained active participants in the milieu, none had been convicted for terrorism related offences nor been members of groups proscribed under anti-terrorism legislation. However, some had contact with such groups and a number had served prison sentences for offences related to violence or threat of violence.

The studies were undertaken as part of the Horizon 2020 DARE project and conducted using an ethnographic approach. By this we mean an inductive and evolving approach to research involving ‘direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)’ (O’Reilly, 2005: 2). A skeleton interview schedule was used as a baseline for interviews for both case studies and included 12 blocks of questions/prompts. Analysis was conducted separately for each of the two cases although employed a skeleton coding tree designed for use across the whole project and the co-authors shared insights throughout the process of analysis. The two field cases came together in the form of the mediated dialogue events discussed below. Written informed consent was obtained prior to commencing fieldwork and revisited informally throughout the research. Research participants are referred to using pseudonyms, often chosen by respondents themselves (in some cases denoting seminal figures mentioned in the Qur’an or from Islamic history).

¹⁰ We use the terms ‘Islamist’ and ‘extreme-right’ in inverted commas when referring to the milieus studied to indicate that these are external ascriptions and not how milieu actors think of themselves.

Fieldwork was conducted between November 2017 and November 2020 and included semi-structured interviews with 39 research participants and almost 100 field diary entries (recording observations at attended events, informal communications, social media interactions etc.). The article also draws on video interviews and observations from a series of three mediated dialogue events organised with a total of six participants from these two milieus. Three participants from each milieu were invited to the initial dialogue event facilitated by professional conflict resolution practitioners and – on the initiative of the participants at the end of the first dialogue event – two further meetings, in less formal settings, were organised. From the ‘Islamist’ milieu the three participants were already well known to each other, being part of the informal social gathering organised by one of them. From the ‘extreme-right’ milieu, two had been friends for many years and the third was acquainted with one of these two through demonstrations they had both attended. All participants were male and aged 19-33. The method and initial outcomes of the mediated dialogue are outlined in Hussain et al. (2019).

A brief outline of each milieu studied is provided below with a summary of data sets by milieu in Table 1 and socio-demographic profiles of research participants in Table 2.

The ‘extreme-right’ milieu

Research with the ‘extreme right’ milieu was conducted by Hilary Pilkington and consists of individuals active in movements, organisations or campaigns in the UK associated in public discourse with the ‘far right’ or ‘extreme right’. Research participants reported contact with 32 movements but all had been active in, affiliated with, or attended events of, at least one of: the English Defence League (EDL)¹¹, the Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), the British National Party (BNP), Britain First, Generation Identity (GI) or Tommy Robinson support groups. While this milieu does not consist of a single organisation or network, all research participants had some connection to at least one other participant (see: Pilkington, 2020: 15-18). As noted above, two individuals were disengaged at the time of interview: Jermaine, who considered himself to be a ‘former’ and had begun to deliver PVE

¹¹ For a brief outline of each of these movements, see Pilkington, 2020: 177-179.

actions in educational settings; and Lee, who had resolved to disengage from a group he had previously led after his recent release from prison.

Field research commenced after an informal meeting with a young man, first encountered as an EDL activist, who allowed the researcher to follow him into his milieu – attending events, meeting some of his friends, following him on social media and making new contacts. Two further ‘snowballs’ were started subsequently by direct messaging (via Twitter) a core member of a movement of interest, in one case, and via a ‘gatekeeper’ known from earlier research in the other.

While privileged access to the group ensued from the researcher's shared whiteness with research participants, this was not an ‘insider’ ethnography; in terms of age, gender, occupational status and political viewpoint, the researcher was an outsider. This was handled with what Ezekiel (2002: 52) describes as ‘candour’; being open with participants about who you are and using the disagreement that ensues as a starting point for engagement. For some potential respondents, this was an unwelcome intrusion; one leading member of a group of interest refused access to observe group actions saying such observation ‘would just feel like reducing our Movement to a petri dish’ (Field diary, 24.08.2018). However, others attached value to engaging in dialogue without prior judgement and maintained regular contact and involvement with the research over many months.

The ‘Islamist’ milieu

The ‘Islamist’ case study was conducted by Ajmal Hussain. It focused on a particular street in Birmingham, referred to here as ‘Muslim Street’. The city is home to the largest number of Muslims for any UK municipality – constituting around a quarter of its 1.1 million population and with around 70% of Muslims being located in a quarter of the city's 40 wards¹². Almost half of this population is under 24 years of age and this is reflected in the burgeoning commercial enterprises and formal and informal organisations that cater to the needs of young Muslims. The street around which the study was focused had a rich Islamic infrastructure and resources for living out Islamist lifestyles and was seen by research participants as a hub where young Muslims gathered, connected and passed through.

¹² See: <https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/census2011>

However, recent media and policy attention to the street and broader neighbourhood as a space where extremism is fostered has intensified assumptions about the propensity towards violent extremism of south Asian Muslims living in such areas, which are also characterised by high rates of multiple deprivation. The street is a focus of attention for Prevent programmes and Channel mentors who operate in partnership with a number of prominent mosques there. Thus, the milieu was of interest to this study not just because of its physicality but the sociality it afforded. Activists were attracted to the area because of its combination of resources, in the form of spaces, and individuals potentially receptive to their message (which was often framed in a negative perception of south Asian Islam and folk practices and its traditional authorities).

The interviews were all conducted some time after the researcher had been introduced to participants. This allowed time to broker rapport and the informal meetings were a valuable way to find out about participants' relations to others and the milieu. Being a 'researcher' often aroused suspicion from potential respondents that the researcher was a 'spy' or worked for the government's Prevent programme. When this led to wider discussion about the so-called War on Terror and the 'West vs Islam', however, being an academic researcher could also help displace concerns as it rendered the researcher someone scientifically informed in this field. Being a fellow Muslim also helped the researcher in this regard.

Table 1 Data sets by milieu

Milieu	No. respondents	No. interviews	No. fieldwork diary entries	Other data
'Extreme-right'	20	25 audio, 5 video ¹³	61	9 text documents from observed events
'Islamist'	19	20 audio, 5 video	37	

¹³ The video interviews in both milieus were recorded with participants in the mediated dialogue event, pre and post-event.

Table 2 Socio-demographic profiles of the research participants by milieu

Milieu	Age	Gender	Employment	Ethnicity ¹⁴	Religion
‘Extreme-right’	Under 30 – 15 In 30s – 5	Male – 15 Female – 5	Full-time – 9 Part-time – 3 Unpaid employment (volunteering, in activism, caring) – 3 Full-time education – 1 Unemployed – 4	Born in UK – 20 White – 20 (including 2 of mixed White European heritage)	Protestant – 5 Catholic – 5 Other Christian – 4 Pagan – 1 None – 5
‘Islamist’	Under 30 – 18 In 30s – 1	Male – 15 Female – 4	Those employed worked mainly in the food retail sector, security and warehouse packing often on zero hours contracts	Pakistani (Mir Puri) heritage – 10 Somali heritage – 4 Bangladeshi heritage – 1 Afghani heritage – 1 African Caribbean heritage – 1 Mixed heritage – 2	Muslim – 19

Limitations and reflections

There are a number of limitations and ethical considerations of the research that are important to note. First, the research was not designed specifically to study attitudes to, or experiences of, P/CVE; these themes emerged in the course of the ethnographies. This is reflected in an unevenness in data and affects the ‘Islamist’ milieu in particular, since one impact of ‘suspectification’ is a reluctance to talk about extremism and radicalisation.

Secondly, the focus of the studies on young people means that their trajectories of radicalisation, or non-radicalisation, are incomplete. Caution should be exercised, in particular, in comparing the findings with other studies, of ‘formers’ for example, since in our cases, the majority of research participants had not crossed the threshold to violent extremism, and may never do so.

¹⁴ Ethnicity and religion are recorded according to how respondents identified themselves.

Thirdly, it is important to recognise the element of self-selection in the study. Individuals who took part in the research were those prepared to engage in the question of what constitutes extremism and how to tackle it. Those who were not open to this dialogue, and challenge to their views, could simply decline to participate. The findings are partial, therefore, in as much as they do not represent views across these milieus, still less beyond them. We thus make no claims to the generalisability of the findings, only that there is insight to be gained from listening to those who do engage about the potential role for milieu actors in P/CVE.

Fourthly, it is important to ensure that in listening to those engaged in radical milieus, we do so critically. For understandable reasons, as Dawson (2019: 74) notes, there are deep suspicions about what terrorists say, which may cast doubt on the value of data drawn from empirical research with those active in extremist movements. The view ‘from inside’, we argue, is important (and in the case of extremist actors often absent from the picture) but it should not be accorded privileged status or taken at face value (Khalil, 2019). However, as Dawson (2019: 84) also concludes, the explanations and reflections on their attitudes and behaviour offered by active members of extremist movements broadly conform to the classic sociological definition of ‘accounts’ (what we refer to in this article as ‘interview narratives’). They thus carry similar validity as long as they are subject to the same critical interrogation as other such accounts.

Finally, there is always a danger when studying ‘distasteful’ (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992: 217) groups that researchers, consciously or unconsciously, become a legitimising ‘mouthpiece’ for the individuals or groups studied. Even if they do not expect their views to be relayed verbatim, just being the subject of a ‘scientific’ study may provide visibility and possible legitimation for stigmatised groups (ibid.: 229-30; Horgan, 2012: 196; Pilkington, 2019: 25; Dawson, 2019: 75). The ethnographic method affords the possibility of triangulating interview narratives with observed behaviour as well as of extended engagement with individuals. This is extremely valuable when seeking to retain a critical stance towards respondents' accounts and be honest about one's own position in relation to their views, since it allows time for sufficient mutual trust to develop to enable critical and challenging conversations to take place.

Emic understandings of (countering) radicalisation: the role of the state

Actors in the milieus studied do not understand their own trajectories as ones of ‘radicalisation’. They associate that term either with external discourses that falsely understand, label and target them as ‘extremists’ or as having relevance only to ‘others’, outside or within their own milieus, who are ‘genuinely’ extremist. Here we do not document research participants’ self-dissociation from ‘radicalisation’ but, rather, explore how actors in the two milieus understand radicalisation and its ‘causes’ and how this frames their views on preventing or countering radicalisation.

Stoking frustration and silencing dissent: perceptions of the role of the state in driving radicalisation among ‘extreme-right’ actors

In line with etic conceptualisations of radicalisation, for activists in the ‘extreme-right’ milieu studied ‘radicalisation’ was associated primarily with the perceived problem of Islamist radicalisation. Robbie states that ‘not enough’s been done’, bemoaning in particular that, ‘You can download ISIS things off the internet. [...] surely that’s step one of preventing radicalisation – put an internet ban on anything to do with that, be it videos, articles, you know, whatever else they use.’ This illustrates what McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008: 430) refer to as the reactive mechanisms of radicalisation, fuelled by ‘a dynamic of opposition in which the significant events are the actions of others’. Whilst these ‘others’ were often understood to be ‘radical Muslims’, political elites and the state are also perceived as exacerbating radicalisation by failing to tackle its root causes, not addressing the impact of terrorist attacks and ‘letting thousands of ISIS fighters back into this country’ (Dan). Thus emic understandings of radicalisation also concur with relational approaches to radicalisation in which the ‘actors’ are not only ‘out-groups’ or oppositional non-formal actors (in this case ‘Islamists’ or ‘Antifa’) but include state and institutional actors (see, for example: della Porta, 2014; Knott et al., 2018; Busher and Macklin, 2015; Malthaner, 2017b).

Whilst quick to talk about ‘Islamist’ radicalisation, research participants often had to be prompted to reflect on whether radicalisation also happened in their own milieu. When they did, they mainly attributed radicalisation to two, interconnected, causes:

anger/frustration; and the denial of political voice. The concerns people feel they need to voice vary but include: the ‘problem’ of Islam; the loss of community due to ‘excessive immigration’; and the feeling that the expression of (white) English identity is equated with racism. However, anger and frustration over these issues, and thus potential radicalisation into violence, is consistently associated with the perceived prevention of the voicing of these issues:

People are starting to get really frustrated. And that is when violence will happen. But people are going to get angry, and violence is going to happen, so long as we are constantly up against this brick wall when it comes to speaking about Islam. That's when you get people radicalising. (Cara)

Dan thinks anger is more palpable than ever at protest events he attends, but that they nonetheless dissipate rather than precipitate that anger. Attempts to prevent people voicing concerns legitimately, he says, exacerbates the anger by ‘turning people into caged animals’ (Field diary, 06.09.2018).

Respondents see radicalisation as an outcome of the failure of the state and its social and political institutions¹⁵. People become radicalised ‘when they're not listened to, when they're ignored’ (Jason) or ‘see that democracy is a lie’ (Billy, Field diary, 11.03.2019). Loss of trust in the state is deeply embedded in milieu actors' perceptions of themselves as accorded ‘second-class citizenship’ (Bartlett and Miller, 2012: 7-8; Pilkington, 2016: 154-76) and central to their movement towards political mobilisation outside the dominant political order (Schmid, 2013: 18). Milieu actors identify a two-stage process by which the state drives radicalisation; the government, through its policies, pushes people to the edge and then exacerbates frustration by curbing freedom to speak out. This is articulated by Paul discussing state policy on immigration:

¹⁵ Research participants discuss the media, the police and the state but references to the latter outnumber the other two combined and while both the media and the police are heavily criticised, they are less frequently viewed as drivers of radicalisation.

[...] I would say extremism is actually being stoked by the establishment [...] in two different ways. Firstly, they are importing people who not only are very different to us Europeans, they have different value systems. But often people who hate our value systems and hate what we are, despise Christianity. They despise certain facets of western culture. And they come here, and that creates extremism, because it's a natural tendency. [...] But the establishment also stokes extremism by saying to anyone that says the things that I'm saying, 'You have no right to say that. You have no right to organise. You have no right to freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of expression. And when we take those things away from you, if we think you still hold those beliefs, we'll hound you. We'll make it so you can't get a job, we'll make it so you're a social pariah. We'll bring in laws that make sure you keep your mouth shut. So you can be dragged off in the middle of the night for just saying something to someone on Twitter.' (Paul)

Cara, in the context of discussing the Yellow Vests movement, also says the situation is being exacerbated by state agencies, including the police: 'that's exactly what our government is doing – pushing too far. Until people will just ignite.' At the same time, anger is fuelled by what milieu actors see as the state's policy of 'silencing' those, such as Tommy Robinson, who speak out (DT). Dan fears Tommy Robinson will be killed by state agencies who view him as having too much power and influence. It follows that actors in this milieu view giving political voice as crucial to preventing radicalisation.

Radicalisation as 'suspectification': misrecognition of the 'real issue'

A similar critique of the state as failing to effectively tackle extremism is found in the 'Islamist' milieu – Mo John calls for the government to 'clamp down on all these far right people' – but, for the most part, actors in this milieu experience too much rather than too little action from the government. In tune with academic critiques of the concept of radicalisation outlined above, milieu actors see government intervention as targeting the Muslim community in general. This, Abu Yahya argues, leads to the misrecognition of ordinary, everyday practice

of faith:

Prevent, these kind of things, they focus more on the radical elements, or what they consider to be radical. For me as a Muslim, praying five times a day is just part and parcel of being a Muslim. [...] For other people [...] that's extreme and that's radical. A person who grows his beard. Someone who prays five times. That's an issue. Because if that's what you consider to be radical, then first of all, it distracts from the real issue, which is real radicalisation in the community; and also, it demonises large proportions of the society. Because if the, if the goal and the objective is changing Islam, that's never gonna happen, so you might as well lock all of us up. (Abu Yahya)

The state was frequently implicated by milieu actors in the disaffection felt by Muslims. As within the 'extreme-right' milieu, some of this sentiment was linked to a wider disaffection with the state of democracy and its institutions, described by one research participant as a 'tyranny of the majority', that meant Muslims would always be treated unequally (Sayyid Qutb). However, foreign policy interventions were felt to play a particular role in radicalisation:

[...] when it comes to the reason why radicalisation takes place, my personal opinion, like one of the things that builds the foundation for it is like... I don't know if you remember the war on terror on Iraq and Afghanistan, right. So under this war on terror, innocent people got killed by Americans. So a Muslim is going to feel pain for his fellow Muslim. A Muslim's not going to think about what the religion says sometimes, *he will use his emotions*. (Abu Hamza)

Indeed, such emotions caused by injustice are 'one of the main tools the radicals utilise to propagate their ideology' (Hilal).

In the case of the 'Islamist' milieu actors, anger at injustice towards Muslims worldwide is exacerbated by the state, specifically, the suspicion and surveillance directed

towards Muslim communities alongside the responsabilisation of Muslim communities to ‘do more’ to tackle extremism. This left participants in this study feeling fearful of responding; there was even an initial hesitancy to engage in discussing radicalisation, extremism or Prevent at all, for fear of implicating themselves in ‘un-Britishness’. Other empirical studies in the UK and US have demonstrated how suspicion and surveillance work to limit political subjectivities (Ali, 2016), undermine a sense of political inclusion and raise barriers to political participation (Manning and Akhtar, 2021: 973) and thus fuel ‘a process of silencing young Muslims, diminishing their citizenship claims and marginalising involvement in the structures of representation’ (Finlay and Hopkins, 2020: 564). At the same time, misrecognition as ‘suspect’ can also mobilise social action in general and resistance to Prevent and institutional Islamophobia in particular (ibid.; Pilkington and Acik, 2020: 191). In this study, respondents navigated the conflict between wanting to have their voice heard but fearing speaking out about ‘suspectification’ directly, through engagement in *dawah* (inviting people to know about Islam), which they undertook in visible public spaces, such as the city centre (Hussain 2022). This practice ran alongside the work of the ‘head men’ with those Muslims who were seen as interpreting the religion incorrectly and thus leaving themselves susceptible to extremism. In order to protect against this, what is needed Abu Yahya says, is ‘not less Islam, but more Islam. These people, they're ignorant about the very texts that they're quoting.’ (Abu Yahya). Similarly, AbdAllah believes those who ‘get radicalised’ are those who do not follow genuine scholars but ‘people like on YouTube, who can't even speak Arabic. Who can't even read the Qur'an. They're taking knowledge off random people [...]’

Respondents acknowledge, however, that doing *dawah* is not always enough. Mo John reflects on a period when he had needed to feel he was ‘doing something’ to directly help innocent Muslims around the world who are ‘unnecessarily dying’. Having considered travelling to Syria, he decided against it because while his intention was to help, in practice ‘you won't only be helping them, you'll be fighting for them eventually’. This illustrates an important concern raised by another respondent, Afia, who perceives a danger that allowing Islamophobia to focus young Muslims on Islam as their ‘sole identity’ could itself make them vulnerable to radicalisation:

[...] these youngsters that are going out to fight and joining these radical causes, for me I feel like if they have an understanding, a reflective, reflexive understanding of who they are, have an understanding of their identity, being able to situate yourself in the wider sort of context, being able to understand issues to do with race and inequalities and how we should... how we navigate them, you have a better understanding of who you are as a person. So you have a stronger identity. These people are vulnerable. They're latching onto Islam, and that becomes their sole identity. 'I'm not even Pakistani anymore. I'm not British. I am a Muslim first and foremost.' So if you have a better understanding of who you are, then I feel like you're more confident in that and you're not going to be swayed so easily. (Afia)

In this way, the institutionalisation of misrecognition through counter-terrorism measures can act to impose or channel identities in a way that shapes respondents' agency and circumscribes their challenge to inequality and injustice not least through the suppression of the intersectionality of identities (Pilkington and Acik, 2020: 194).

Experiences of P/CVE: the view of the 'targets'

P/CVE programmes and interventions are highly diverse, have different strengths and weaknesses and are rarely subject to scientific evaluation to measure their effectiveness (Koehler, 2017: 291) or incorporate what 'users' think about how radicalisation can be prevented or countered (Scrivens et al., 2019). As noted above, since this study was not designed to systematically gather user experiences or evaluations of P/CVE, we cannot provide a focused engagement with existing literature on its effectiveness, impact and evaluation but rather offer some insight into milieu actors' views on, and personal experiences of, counter extremism policy and practice.

Mass targeting of PVE as counterproductive

Actors in both the ‘extreme-right’ and the ‘Islamist’ milieu saw themselves as the targets of preventative counter-terrorism measures that were either ineffective and/or counterproductive.

Salma describes Prevent as ‘inherently racist’ and recounts that teachers being trained how to prevent radicalisation are told ‘if you see a group of Muslim kids around a computer, looks suspicious’. She does not refute that radicalisation is a phenomenon that needs addressing but views Prevent as ‘Islamophobic’, ‘targeting our community’ and resulting in ‘so many false claims’. Freda also criticises the government for:

[...] spending millions of pounds on counter-terrorism initiatives that are just blanket initiatives thrown at young people who are deemed to be vulnerable to be radicalised because they live in a certain area and they've come from a certain background and they practise a certain faith, it's not helpful. It can just have the opposite effect [...] (Freda)

In a damning critique of counter-terrorism initiatives, Freda complains that the government's idea of counter-terrorism is to ‘co-opt’ English language classes for older Asian women, so that they can say, “we taught this many people in this community about counter-terrorism” and now they're prepared to like, you know, deradicalise their sons and check their laptops’. She is also highly critical of the way mosques are implicated in radicalisation when, in fact, ‘most mosques do everything they can to root out extremism, to publicly denounce any kind of terrorism’. The condemnation of mosques, she says, is counterproductive because it means that, when young people have genuine questions, as they find their own path to religion, mosques are ‘too scared to talk to you because they're too scared to be known as anything like that.’ The result, she says, is that you are left to ‘talk to some random person on the internet or some dodgy person that you meet in a study circle in someone's flat’ (Freda). This appears to be borne out by Abu Levi's experience who, frustrated by attempts to have serious discussion in his university classes engaged in discussions primarily on social media. The danger of issues around radicalisation becoming ‘a taboo subject’ (Sayyid Qutb) is

brought home in the discussion of a young man known to four people interviewed in the milieu, who was killed in Syria allegedly fighting for ISIS. After 9/11, Islamist-inspired people were afraid to talk about those they knew to have been caught up in *jihadi* violence in case they were assumed to be part of their inner circle:

I think with [name of friend], it was kind of the same. Once obviously word had spread within the circle of friends that he had gone out, it pretty much was like a taboo subject, like I said. It's just, everyone knows that it's there, but no one wants to discuss it or talk about it [...] (Sayyid Qutb)

At the same time, the silencing effect of this taboo may also be one reason why what was happening for this young man was not picked up by his friends, discussed and worked through.

Among the 'extreme-right' milieu, it is strategies targeted at the voicing of ideas (online and offline) that are discussed as potentially counterproductive. Talking about social media bans and potential prohibition of marches, Dan fears that this would push people into more radical actions:

That's why even with social media, taking them off social media, you're just fuelling the fire, to be fair. That's what I think. What would you rather do, someone go on and have a little rant on Facebook, or someone go out and blow a mosque up? You know what I mean. [...] I think social media and marches do help people get their anger out [...] they're pushing people into a corner, you know what I mean. (Dan)

Many members of the milieu had had temporary or lifetime, bans from social media platforms; a grievance exacerbated by the sense that the police have got their priorities wrong. As Mikey puts it, 'what makes people angry' is that the police are spending time following up 'aggressive or hurtful comments' on social media whilst they also complain that there are not enough resources to follow up people who pose real security threats. Will, who had lost his

job after being exposed by an anti-racist and anti-fascist campaign group, was also critical of such organisations whose actions, he argued, risked radicalising people by leaving them with nothing to lose:

[...] the aim of that [exposure campaigns] is like to apply pressure, so that you run out of money, and then you basically have to quit. [...] I don't think it works as a kind of anti-extremism tactic, to throw people out of normal life. [...] I think the problem with these things comes because they are fringe [...] I think it's fringe groups that become extreme. [...] If it exists way outside the mainstream, it can never get in. Over time, it almost makes sense for them to become violent. [...] So I think it backfires that, I don't think the kind of ostracisation thing works. (Will)

A similar point is made by Craig, who asks, 'if a political voice and a political analysis is not allowed, because it's deemed to be too extreme or whatever, where do those people go and what do they do if they're not allowed a political voice?' His answer is to tackle radicalisation by reducing frustration through 'giving political voice'. Paul, a former BNP activist, also argues that activism provides political voice to frustrated people in areas where 'there is anger, justifiable anger'. Parties like the BNP, he says do not 'create extremism' but give them 'a positive, legal outlet' (Paul).

Personal experiences of CVE

Among 'extreme-right' milieu actors, the police are routinely described as being disproportionately aggressive towards right-wing activists (as opposed to left-wing counter demonstrators) at protest actions. However, personal experience of surveillance and intrusion from counter-terrorism police and agencies is reported relatively rarely. Dan is one of the exceptions and complains:

I'm not going about it the wrong way I aint out there attacking innocent Muslims or vandalizing mosques etc no im trying to go about it the right way have my

voice heard and make a change for the better but ive constantly got police on my back and it is making me more angry. (Dan, recorded in Field diary, 06.09.2018)

He says the police turn up at his house as a ‘weekly routine’, his social media posts are monitored and he had been arrested as he left the house early on a Saturday morning to travel to an English Defence League demonstration. Although he was released after being interviewed at the police station and having his speech confiscated, by that time he had missed his train and his participation in the demonstration had been prevented (Field diary, 06.09.2018). At the same time, when he organises his own events, he is able to liaise with the police and there had been no attempt to refer him to CVE programmes (via Prevent).

Mo John from the ‘Islamist’ milieu also recounts having been stopped by counter-terrorism police as he was travelling to the airport on his way to an international sporting competition. He had been asked about involvement in terrorist acts and whether he knew about groups such as Al Muhajiroun and Al Qaeda. Mo John suspects someone from his discussion group might have informed on him:

I think personally, whoever did sort of grass on me was wrong to do so, because I don't believe in terrorists. I don't believe in suicide bombings. [...] I don't believe in ISIS. And I don't believe in any of that. I think personally, as I say, *jihad* is personally between yourself, you know, is your *nafs*¹⁶. If you can control your *nafs*, that's the biggest challenge. (Mo John)

Mo John's conclusion from this traumatic experience is that ‘this is why Muslims hate Muslims. Because there has to be one idiot that goes out there and assumes something, and gets a lot of people in trouble’. Both the suspicion that he had been reported by people he knew and his response confirm Abbas' (2019) understanding of how Muslim communities are co-opted into the process of ‘suspectification’. The ‘internal suspect body’, she argues (ibid.: 261) is constructed and materialised through preventative counter-terrorism, which generates

¹⁶ ‘*Nafs*’ is Arabic parlance for the ego.

‘the suspected extremist for Muslims to look out for’ and the ‘suspected informer who might report fellow Muslims’.

Being ‘grassed up’ by those within the movement, who saw you as too extreme, was experienced by a research participant from the ‘extreme-right’ milieu also. Lee recounts being arrested prior to a demonstration after leaders of the movement with whom he had been in dispute over photos that had surfaced of him ‘doing Nazi salutes’, had passed information to the police.

But on the morning of the [name of town] demo, I was walking in with a few of my lot from [name of town] and the police arrested me there and then and said, ‘Right, you’re, you’re not going in this demo because we’ve been, we’ve had information that you’re here to kick off.’ (Lee)

Lee was never convicted of terrorism or hate crime related offences but had an extensive history of extreme-right activism and had served three prison sentences for violent disorder related to it. After being released from prison the last time, he was assigned a Prevent mentor. At this point, Lee had made a decision to disengage and was disappointed in the minimal contact or support he received from his mentor (Field diary, 01.10.2019). He had the impression his mentor was more interested in gaining information from him about the movement than supporting his exit from it:

[...] he’d come in and he’d, he’d ask you what you’d been up to and that for about two minutes. And then it were, ‘Have you heard about this? Have you heard about that? [...]’ At one point, he came and said, ‘Oh is [name of movement] setting back up? We’ve been told that they are.’ Said, ‘Well how would I know if I’m not involved with it anymore?’ [...] When Tommy [Robinson] were coming to [name of region] and that, they were all over me then. [...] Seeing if I knew what were going on and who were there and did I know where they were going. (Lee)

Lee received no targeted counter-extremism intervention, although he had completed a general programme designed to prevent re-offending by raising awareness of the costs of offending for family, victims and self. The decisive moment in making a decision to sever ties with the movement, came when he received a visit from social workers who told him that continuing on his current path risked social services intervening to protect his children or his girlfriend's children: 'If they hadn't threatened me with taking me kids away, I'd probably still be doing it.' (Lee). Lee thus sums up his trajectory in and out of the milieu as: 'I radicalised myself, and now I've gone through it, and now I've deradicalised myself, if you know what I mean.' (Lee). Significantly, he had done this through active re-integration (Barrelle, 2015), that is, through becoming involved in community activism around the estate he had grown up on, which had given him 'something else to focus on' (Lee).

There were also positive, or at least empathetic, views on Prevent within the milieus. As one research participant from the 'Islamist' milieu put it, 'I think some people have themselves to blame sometimes, by actions they're doing' (Abu Levi). Hilal also compares Prevent in the UK positively to similar programmes 'in Muslim countries', where people suspected of extremism – even for having a beard – are 'taken to prison and disappeared'. Jermaine, from the 'extreme-right' milieu, had the only positive personal experience. He had been referred to Prevent through college and had struck up an instant rapport with his mentor, in whom he 'had a lot of trust'. The mentor had given Jermaine confidence that he could redeploy his skills successfully and, subsequently, he not only withdrew from activism but started to engage in CVE himself by talking to young people about his own experience, first guided by his Prevent mentor and then later through an NGO focusing on the deployment of 'formers' to counter right-wing extremism.

Engaging from within: the role of differentiation, listening and dialogue in countering extremism

Actors in both milieus studied recognise the presence, and harms, of extremism within and beyond their milieu but view external agencies as indiscriminately targeting those sharing certain ideas or faith, which can drive people towards rather than away from extremism.

When milieu actors identify extremism within their own or adjacent milieus, they turn primarily to informal mechanisms to prevent or constrain radicalisation of individuals and articulate the conviction that it is through listening and engaging that people can best be deterred from radicalisation pathways.

The role of formal and informal mechanisms in countering extremism

Among the ‘extreme-right’ milieu, differentiation between groups and self-distancing from those organisations seen as ‘too extreme’ were central to strategies for preventing extremism. Research participants often explained their understanding of ‘extremism’ by contrasting their activism to movements or parties they considered to be ‘extreme’, ‘radical’ or ‘far right’ (Pilkington, 2020: 45-47). National Action, Combat 18 and the National Front are described universally in this way due to their association with neo-Nazism while some in the milieu also refer to the BNP or Generation Identity as ‘racist’ or ‘too extreme’. Emic understandings of extremism are primarily related to behaviours (rather than ideas); the use, threat or provocation of violence is almost always seen as unacceptable. In this milieu, it thus becomes part of organisational identity and authenticity to mark (and self-police) the boundaries between one’s own ‘non-extremism’ and ‘other’ organisations that are ‘violent’ or ‘far right’. As it forged itself out of a split with the Football Lads Alliance in March-April 2018, for example, the Democratic Football Lads Alliance adopted the slogan ‘Against all extremism’ in an attempt to signal a distinctive stance:

[...] for whatever reason, mainstream media has accused us of being some kind of anti-Islam group. We've been compared to the EDL, Britain First. We're often sort of compared to sort of like fascism groups, like National Action. And us, as an organisation, we wanted to dispel that myth. Because we don't stand for that. One of our logos is: ‘Against all extremism’, and that includes obviously the usual suspects, things like IRA, Islamists, but also far-right groups like National Action. We just basically condemn extremism in all its forms. (Mikey)

Craig stressed the role of those leading movements like the DFLA in ‘trying to keep a lid on things’ and criticised state agencies and civil society anti-extremism platforms, which sought to ‘break up these organisations’. The loss of these moderating influences and structures, he argued, could effectively ‘push these people underground’ when, in practice, ‘the problems are actually probably coming from some of the sort of little micro elements that aren't really affiliated with anyone, that are far more dangerous’ (Craig). Paul, who describes himself as an ‘anti-extremist’ also claims that the video materials he makes and uploads to his YouTube channel (and had recently been taken down for infringement of community standards) aim to discourage radicalisation amongst what he sees as a vulnerable demographic of ‘younger nationalists’. Paul frames his activism – which also includes ‘mentoring’ of young men with low self-esteem who might otherwise take more radical routes – as redirecting vulnerable young people away from extreme movements. He contrasts his success (at the time of interview he was hosting a weekly talk show with around 90,000 subscribers) with the inefficacy of what he calls ‘crazy deradicalisation courses’. However, the fine line between mentoring young people out of violent extremism and nurturing them into (non-violent) extremism is self-evident even to those within the milieu. Alice characterises Paul's mode of activism as a ‘bit culty’ and ‘hopes’ he is not ‘going to like radicalise anyone’ while another respondent publicly denounced him as one of those ‘neo-Nazi fan boys’ who seeks to draw people from the ‘patriotic movement’ towards a (more extreme) ethnonationalist position (Field diary, 13.04.2020). In this way, some within the milieu may exploit and instrumentalise the gaps in formal CVE intervention.

In the ‘Islamist’ milieu, research participants also recognise the ‘extremist within’ as a familiar presence; not just over decades but centuries. Responding to the researcher's question about what he means when he talks about extremism, Abu Yahya replies that the Prophet himself had warned of the extremist threat (in the form of the Khawarij) and that each generation must struggle with them anew. Thus, while for ‘the West’ the struggle against extremism, might feel new, ‘It's not a new thing for us’. He goes on to reason that this is why their situated knowledge is important:

If you look at it from that perspective, Muslims have been battling this

[extremism]. We have the experience. So it doesn't really make sense that you don't consult Muslims on these kinds of things. (Abu Yahya)

The ongoing struggle with extremism was alluded to also by Mo John in his reference (above) to the '*jihad un nafs*' (battle with the ego) and, in the current era, it is understood as resulting from insufficient understanding of Islam among some young Muslims (Abu Abdullah). Misunderstanding of, or misguidance on, Islam is frequently attributed to individuals' use of 'random' rather than authentic sources of Islamic scholarship often because they were accessible to them when more formal spaces (regular Islamic education classes) were not, either because they were working unsociable hours or because they had lost faith in formal institutions. This, together with the danger that 'aggressive, judgemental responses' might push young people further into violent extremism rather than encouraging them away from it (see also, Scrivens et al., 2019: 9) made self-organisation to contain extremism important in this milieu.

Minnie, acted as a kind of street pastor within the milieu and had established an informal gathering for young people, which took place each Friday night in a designated restaurant or coffee/tea shop. Although Minnie sought to play down the counter-radicalisation role of this group, the evening gatherings provided an alternative space where young Muslims from 'deprived backgrounds', potentially vulnerable to radicalisation, could access mentoring, counselling or practical help and feel safe. This space was carved out not only away from programmes such as Prevent but also from consumer spaces, whose owners were nervous of being seen to be giving 'cover' to disaffected Muslim youth. While Minnie understood such hesitancy, he expressed similar fears to those of Craig (above) about young people being driven underground:

[...] where are they [young people] supposed to go, if you drive them out from everywhere? Drive them out from mosques, drive them out from restaurants, keep driving them out, obviously where they gonna go? They're gonna end up somewhere bad aren't they? (Minnie).

The importance of such spaces is illustrated by the experience of AbdAllah, who had dropped out of college after clashing with a tutor over his behaviour and attitude. The experience left him sceptical of authority, which developed into a wider negative attitude to formal institutions and figures of traditional authority in the community. He turned to self-learning via the internet, using YouTube as a key source of information on current affairs and religion. This left him vulnerable to ‘inauthentic’ interpretations of religious texts and their meanings, which Minnie would correct him on during the Friday night sessions (Field diary, 15.06.2019).

From objects to subjects of P/CVE: Listening and dialogue

When considering what might be an effective way of preventing violent extremism, ‘formers’ in the Scrivens et al. (2019: 7) study highlight the importance of just ‘listening’. This was echoed by two research participants in the ‘extreme-right’ milieu studied here, who suggested that radicalisation can be prevented by ‘listening to’ so-called extremists based on the logic, according to Tonya (citing her friend, and another research participant, Alice). ‘If you've tried to humanise them and actually speak to them, they're more likely to listen.’

Abu Yahya, from the ‘Islamist’ milieu, also noted that talking often resolved things without recourse to official agencies:

[...] there's always brothers with different ideas, different views of things, including people like that. They've come and gone over the years, yeah. But we make it a point to, once we find out about those kind of things, sit them down, get their view of it, because it's important to listen, that they have someone to listen to, and to deal with the issues head on, instead of brushing it under the carpet. And I think they like that, 'cause they're just looking for someone, just like all young people, to listen to them. (Abu Yahya)

Other members of the ‘Islamist’ milieu referred to the exposure of their peers in the milieu to what they called ‘brainwashing’ and how they had dealt with it by talking informally. Jalil and Mamsy both recounted having warned others in the milieu not to believe

those who were encouraging them to join *jihad* in Syria while Afia tried to make sense of why her best friend's brother had left to join ISIS (and was killed in Syria) by imagining that ‘the way they make sense of it is that, you know what, he went to fight, fight for good.’ This empathetic, but critical position, is found in the ‘extreme-right milieu’ too. Alice, for example, talks about tolerating (‘chuckling along with’) anti-Semitic and ‘Nazi’ sentiments of a friend in the milieu because in other ways he had ‘come through’ for her. Gareth also says he thinks his close friend from childhood, Dan, is ‘far right’ and that they ‘very rarely agree’ but he welcomes this disagreement because ‘it's through disagreement and dialogue is where like you can have your beliefs changed’ (Gareth).

In both milieus, it was striking that actors expressed openness to dialogue – often simply referred to as ‘having a conversation’ – with those with whom they disagreed, not only within the milieu but also with ‘others’. In the ‘extreme-right’ milieu, research participants felt that the most appropriate response to radicalism or extremism was to seek ‘dialogue’ or engage with the ‘other’. Reflecting milieu actors' perceptions that they are ‘silenced’, the emphasis is on the need to open up discourse, not close it down. As Cara puts it, ‘If I'm wrong on these things, let's have a conversation. Don't just shoot me down. Do not call me a Nazi, do not call me a racist – have a conversation with me.’ Tonya emphasises that this reflects not only a demand to be heard, but an openness to listening. As she puts it, ‘[...] people think I'm trying to convert or change their mind or whatever. It's like, “No, I just want to have a conversation. This is what I find interesting.”’ (Tonya). This openness to dialogue presents an alternative way forward to counter radicalisation in the minds of milieu actors. For some having this dialogue is critical – without it, people ‘will get angry’, ‘radicalise’ and violence, sectarian violence or even civil war is likely (Mikey). Among actors in the ‘Islamist’ milieu too, there was a sense that the best way to prevent others' extremism was to engage with them. Rejecting the suggestion that the best strategy might just be to ‘keep quiet’, Abu Yahya argues, on the contrary that ‘that just makes things worse’. Instead, he suggests, ‘you have to have a level of empathy’ towards people who might appear ‘as racists or xenophobes’; while some of them are, others among them ‘are just ignorant’. For Abu Yahya, although the Muslim community should not take responsibility for the actions of *jihadis*, they do have a

responsibility to engage in a conversation in order to re-present Islam as it should be presented rather than allowing this distortion of it to go unchallenged:

[...] we're not really responsible for what extremists do or *jihadis* do. I, I didn't blow anybody up. I didn't murder anybody. Personally speaking, I have nothing to do with that, and Islam itself is free from that. But there is, on some level, a level of responsibility, just as Muslims, towards those people who claim to be Muslims, 'cause this is Islam that's being portrayed every time a person is killed in the name of Islam. [...] we're not responsible for the action itself. But [...] it's upon us to step up in presenting Islam [...] as it's meant to be (Abu Yahya)

A stated desire to be 'listened to' or engage in dialogue by those active in radical milieus, of course, does not provide evidence that such dialogue would result in a movement away from these milieus or even prevent further radicalisation. However, the commitment to dialogue in both milieus was observed in practice when three actors from each of the milieus took part in a series of mediated dialogues in which they came together. The dialogues were inspired initially by one research participant's reflections on an initiative he had undertaken himself to seek dialogue with an Imam at his local mosque and how it had left him wanting more:

And I had the Imam of me local mosque out, speaking to him one-on-one, and he was an all right fella – shook me hand. Speaking to him outside the mosque, and he agreed with me like. He said, 'Do you know, I think you're right what you're saying.' And that's what, all it takes is a little discussion, you know what I mean. Even, even now, where tensions are high. That's why I've always said to you Hilary, I'd like to actually sit opposite a radical Muslim or someone with thoughts of being radical and have a talk with them, and just find out why, why it is he feels that way, you know what I mean. (Dan)

This openness to dialogue was a disposition that a number of participants in the Islamist milieu also harboured. It was partly satisfied through their regular *dawah* activities, which brought them into contact with members of the public, but they also sought more meaningful opportunities to ‘learn about them, where they’re coming from, what they have in common with us and what misconceptions they have about Muslims’ (Minnie). This reciprocation of a desire to engage led to a series of ‘mediated dialogues’, facilitated by trained conflict resolution practitioners (see: Hussain et al., 2019), from which we might draw a number of lessons regarding the potential for involvement of individuals still active in radical(ising) milieus in P/CVE work.

The first is the importance of the participants entering the process as the subjects not the objects of the intervention. The participants had been known to the researchers for more than six months prior to the dialogue and, notwithstanding the high level of hostility to the ‘other’ in their milieu, had spontaneously expressed a desire to engage in contact with one another. Secondly, crucial to the success of the dialogue was the genuine sense among participants that they had equal status and platform (see also: Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006: 766; Scrivens et al., 2019: 11); that the questions challenged both sides, rather than one side always being required to defend their principles against attack from the other, as Gareth put it. In this sense, the dialogues involved a process of ‘doing with’, not ‘doing to’ the participants. Thirdly, the value of the intervention is as much in the process as the product. It was vital to both sets of participants that a shift in attitude or behaviour was not set as the objective of the engagement (Hussain et al., 2019). Going into the first dialogue, Abu Yahya had not expected any significant shift in attitude from his interlocutors but that the process of ‘talking’ would do ‘some good in the world’. Thus, when he reflected after the dialogue that ‘they were genuinely open to hearing us out’ (Abu Yahya), his expectations were met. Gareth also felt that dialogue had been ‘excellent’, precisely because views were challenged but without denying one another the right to hold different views: ‘Everyone’s been open, everyone’s been honest. We’ve challenged each other and we’ve come to some sort of reconciliation and we can reconcile our differences; we can hold onto our beliefs. And we keep that level of respect’ (Gareth).

The value of the intervention – the progress achieved – from the practitioners' side also may be measured by individuals turning up and committing, not how eloquently they can recant their previously held views (ibid.: 10). Where a shift may be identified, however, is in the development among participants of new reference points (which might go on to exist alongside, or replace, existing ones) that can forge change through broadening perspectives and relationship building (ibid.: 7). The most literal example of this from the mediated dialogues, was the shift in signification of the Qur'an for Dan. Prior to the intervention, Dan strongly believed that the roots of Islamist terrorism lay in the Qur'an, which, he thought, 'makes the majority of Muslims violent'. However, when Mo John recited from Qur'an during the dialogue (in a space given to each participant to say something they wanted to about themselves), Dan was viscerally affected by the hearing the recitation, which, simultaneously, made his heart beat quicker and felt like 'a peaceful sound'. Others reflected more generally on how the dialogue had enabled participants to evaluate their own opinions, trajectories and environment/milieu anew and imagine broader horizons. Minnie, who was active in the Islamist milieu, remarked that 'I'd like to move somewhere else to be honest, because here people can be closed-minded, I'd like to move somewhere where I can encounter new ideas and people, like London'. Mikey also felt that the sense of 'togetherness' experienced might change future behaviour. As he put it, 'to have a group of people in the room that perhaps under normal circumstances wouldn't speak to each other or wouldn't even walk on the same side of the street... and just to have that conversation was great' (Mikey). It meant, he said, in the future, they might walk down the same side of the road as opposed to crossing it to avoid one another.

Thus, while participants were not moved by the dialogue to make a fundamental break with their milieus or the beliefs circulating in them, it created openings that could be further worked. Whilst the implications of this for P/CVE need to be explored more explicitly, we propose that taking the emic perspective into consideration suggests that those active in radical(ising) milieus may not be characterised by the closed-mindedness generally attributed to them (see also: Pilkington, 2021: 15-18).

Conclusion

This article has argued that there has been a relative lack of attention in radicalisation studies to how the study of emic representations of radicalisation and deradicalisation processes might inform our understanding, and critique, of etic conceptualisations of ‘radicalisation’ and the development of effective P/CVE policy and practice. While it has become increasingly common for researchers, practitioners and policymakers to turn to former extremists to inform their understanding of radicalisation and deradicalisation, the question of how formers think violent extremism should be prevented and countered has been overlooked (Scrivens et al., 2019: 16). Significant insight has been generated by Kühle and Lindekilde's (2012) study of the implications for the prevention of radicalisation of the failure of etic discourse to reflect the complex opinions on terrorism of actors in a radical Muslim milieu and Scrivens et al.'s (2019) consideration of the views of ‘former’ right-wing extremists on how violent extremism and can be prevented and countered. However, this article treads new ground in bringing together the experiences and views of actors still active in such milieus and the understandings of actors in both ‘extreme-right’ and ‘Islamist’ milieus.

First, by considering how actors in these two milieus themselves understand what ‘drives’ and what might ‘prevent’ radicalisation, we identify significant dissonance between milieu actors’ own (emic) understandings and etic (academic, policy, practice) conceptualisations of extremism. This is important, it is argued, because if individuals do not recognise themselves in the picture of those targeted by P/CVE interventions, their capacity to reach their ‘target’ group is significantly reduced. The study finds, moreover, that in both the ‘extreme-right’ and the ‘Islamist’ milieus studied, the state is perceived as deeply implicated in driving (rather than preventing) radicalisation. However, ‘extreme-right’ actors see the state as failing to address Islamist radicalisation whilst simultaneously using counter-extremism policy to ‘silence’ those on the Right who call for harsher measures against Islamist extremism. The views of ‘Islamist’ milieu actors, for whom state foreign policy is a key driver of grievance, are more in line with critiques of the etic conceptualisation of radicalisation in which the state is profoundly implicated in the ‘suspectification’ of Muslim communities through too much, not too little, Islamist-targeted P/CVE. In thinking about how to prevent

radicalisation within their own milieus, these perceptions lead to calls, in the case of the ‘extreme-right’ milieu actors, for more political voice. In the case of the ‘Islamist’ milieu, it inclines actors towards public ‘silence’ on matters of radicalisation – to avoid making themselves further visible to the state – whilst seeking to address the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Islam through *dawah* (Hussain 2022).

Secondly, the article suggests that as the ‘targets’ of P/CVE policies and interventions, radical milieu actors have valuable knowledge based on first-hand experiences, in person or in their milieu, of counter-terrorism, policing and P/CVE programmes and interventions. It finds that, in both the ‘extreme-right’ and ‘Islamist’ cases, actors in the milieus point to counterproductive impacts of current P/CVE approaches. In the former case, actors warn that indiscriminate targeting of all ‘extreme-right’ actors, regardless of whether they promote violence or not, may drive them into more extremist groups whilst angering many more. In the latter case, the toxic climate of ‘suspectification’ means the subject of radicalisation has become ‘taboo’ and potentially prevents important conversations within the milieus, even between friends, that could allow young people to discuss their concerns and find non-radicalising pathways to work through and address them.

Finally, we outline a series of ways in which milieu actors understand their roles, and the roles of organisations or authorities in their milieus, as engaging in constraining extremism ‘within’. Through the example of the participation of a number of research participants from both milieus in a series of ‘mediated dialogues’, we also illustrate the openness of some milieu actors themselves to engaging with agencies involved in P/CVE employing dialogic approaches. While the basis of this article is essentially an academic research study, we suggest that it has policy and practice implications. Counter-extremism policy and practice ‘targets’ communities or groups considered ‘vulnerable’ to ‘radicalisers’ or ‘radicalising messages’, often shutting down or demonising (as extremism) messages and agents that appeal to those communities. This, we suggest, may prove counterproductive as it fuels existing grievances about silencing and underestimates the agency and situated knowledge that those in radical milieus have. It also rests on assumptions about the incapacity or unwillingness (due to ideologisation or ‘brainwashing’) of young people to challenge their own views and empathise with ‘others’ in a way that can make direct contact and dialogic

interventions work. This article presents an alternative vision of a counter-extremism policy and practice that includes the situated knowledge of actors in radical milieus, young people's trajectories through them and how to prevent their crossing of the threshold into violent extremism.

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